**05 Political Participation**

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[Print](http://thethinkspot.com/system/pdf/ThinkSpot-american-gov-2010-chapter05.pdf)

More people voted in 2008 than in any previous American presidential election.

**Political Participation and Public Policy**

**Agenda Building**

* In general, an individual is most effective at influencing the policy agenda at the local level. Although one person is unlikely to have a significant impact on the national policy agenda, an individual’s participation can set the agenda for a local government, such as a city, county, or school district. City residents who are worried about rising crime in their neighborhood, for example, can often succeed in putting their issue on the agenda of their local city council.

**Policy Formulation and Adoption**

* Individual citizens who choose to run for office can often have a major effect on policy formulation and adoption. Although relatively few individuals can win election or appointment to a major state or national office, thousands of people have the opportunity to serve in an elected office at the local level on school boards, city councils, or local utility boards. Furthermore, individual voices can be heard at the local level on issues of concern much more readily than on the national level.

**Policy Implementation and Evaluation**

* Individuals can sometimes affect policy implementation. For example, the owners of Adarand Constructors, a Colorado construction company, decided to file suit against the federal Department of Transportation (DOT) over their practice to prefer minority contractors. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the DOT could grant a minority preference only in those circumstances when it could show a clear history of discrimination against minority contractors. The DOT had to abandon its practice of granting preference to minority contractors.
* Finally, individuals can participate in policy evaluation. Citizens can express their pleasure or displeasure with government policies by contacting their elected officials. Individuals can also participate informally in policy evaluation by writing letters to the editor of their local newspaper or calling a radio talk program.

**Key Terms**

**Battleground States**

swing states in which the relative strength of the two major-party presidential candidates is close enough so that either candidate could conceivably carry the state

**Compulsory Voting**

the legal requirement that citizens participate in national elections

**Direct Democracy**

a political system in which the citizens vote directly on matters of public concern

**Political Efficacy**

the extent to which individuals believe they can influence the policymaking process

**Political Participation**

an activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action

**Representative Democracy**

a political system in which citizens elect representatives to make policy decisions on their behalf

**Separation of Powers**

the division of political power among executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government

**Voter Mobilization**

the process of motivating citizens to vote

**Voting Age Population (VAP)**

the number of U.S. residents who are 18 years of age or older

**Voting Eligible Population (VEP)**

the number of U.S. residents who are legally qualified to vote

**Discussion Questions**

1. What are some of the ways in which people can participate in the policy process?

2. How does the level of voter participation in the U.S. compare with the level of participation in other democracies?

3. How have voter participation rates in the U.S. changed since the early 1960s? Why?

4. What is the significance of low voter turnout? What steps could be taken to increase voter turnout?

5. What factors are most closely related to levels of individual participation?

**Interactive Activity**

**Simulation: You Are an Informed Voter Helping Your Classmates Decide How to Vote**

Elections happen regularly in the United States, but most people don't follow politics closely enough to know how to vote each time. In this simulation, you will play the role of an informed voter who must help classmates determine how best to vote. Each classmate will query you with one issue that is important to him or her. Based on this issue, you will do research on each incumbent, and then you will advise your classmate on how to vote. Will this be the start of a rewarding career as a political analyst? Or will your poor decisions leave you flipping burgers at the local burger joint?

[View Simulation](http://www.ablongman.com/cmsredirects/long_mypoliscilab_2009/sim.youareaninfvothelpclassdec.html)

**“Talking About American Government” Podcasts**

Author Neal Tannahill discusses the most important concepts in this chapter

* [Political Participation](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch05_participation.mp3)
* [Voter Turnout](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch05_voter_turnout.mp3)